

College Hookup Culture: Student Perceptions and the

Implications for Individual Well-Being

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

The normalization of casual sexual encounters on college campuses has led to the concept of the hookup culture. In this culture, undergraduate students engage in non-committed sexual acts with the perception of little to no negative effect. This project surveyed students at Ball State University in order to gain an understanding of the presence of hookup culture on campus as well as students' feelings and perceptions. This paper examines that research and connects the findings to those of current professional research. The study found that 75% of the sample population surveyed had at least one collegiate hookup experience. Regarding perceptions, the study found that 78% of participants indicated that hooking up is normal and 63% indicated that most college students hook up. These findings are consistent with current scholarship.

Keywords: hookup culture, student perceptions, student well-being

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Jill Walls for advising me through this project. Her help in the development of this project as well as her support of my personal and professional growth have been significant aspects of my collegiate career.

Process Analysis Statement

In the fall of 2019, I attended the Wheatley Roundtable on Family in Utah and spent three days with a group of other college students creating a presentation on collegiate sexuality. Through this, I discovered my interest in and questions about hookup culture, and I decided I wanted to explore the experiences of Ball State students for my thesis. This meant conducting my own research study for the first time, which in itself was a great learning experience.

At the inception of my thesis, I knew what information I wanted to receive but did not entirely know how to get it. I knew that I would need to complete an IRB process in order to study human subjects, but this was a new and daunting task. With the guidance of Dr. Walls and multiple revisions to my application form, I received project approval and an exemption status to begin my survey.

With the questions written, I next navigated Qualtrics for the creation and publication of my study. Upon the completion of the questionnaire I faced my most daunting task: distribution. I posted on private social organization social media pages and had the recruitment message sent out through Ball State mass email and posted to community Canvas pages. After that, I had to wait, hoping that other students would think the survey was worth their time. In the two weeks the survey link was active, I scoured professional research done in the past two decades to better understand the precedents of my work and organize data to which I could compare my own.

In the analysis of my results, I took care to filter my results through as many variables (age, gender, number of hookups, etc.) in order to discover as many trends as possible. Viewing my results allowed me to reflect upon my conscious and unconscious choices made while

designing the study, and I feel confident that I better understand the precision and intention necessary for designer future research studies.

At the end of my process, I am proud of the task I have accomplished and the information I have received. My hope is that other Ball State student-leaders will see this project and use it to influence how organizations discuss and create programs around the topic of hookups. I am appreciative for the ways in which this project challenged me, and I am excited for my hard work to finally be shown.

Introduction

In United States collegiate atmospheres, hookup culture is a change in interpersonal relationships that has been gaining increased scholarly and media attention. Use of the term hookup was not seen in scholarly literature until it was used sparingly from 2000-2005, and use increased significantly after 2006 (Monto & Carey, 2014, p. 606). With the emergence of a new term, as well as the majority of studies on the topic being cross-sectional, it has been difficult for professionals to determine how long the practice existed before the use of the word “hookup” (Monto & Carey, 2014, p. 606). There is no confirmed definition of a hookup, but one common among many professionals is “an uncommitted sexual encounter that may or may not include intercourse, which occurs between individuals in whom there is no current dating relationship and no expressed or acknowledged expectations of a relationship following the encounter” (Garcia, Litt, Davis, Norris, Kaysen, and Lewis, M, 2019, p. 2).

In recent decades, hookup culture has been a topic of study in connection to emerging adults’ alcohol use and changes in relationship trends. With greater numbers of young adults choosing to delay marriage, some people question the impact hookup culture may have on marriage. Two hypotheses exist to potentially explain this impact. The devaluation hypothesis suggests that young adults no longer value marriage or committed relationships, and the delayed timing hypothesis suggests that young adults are delaying marriage or committed relationships until after they have completed educational or career goals (James-Kangal et al, 2018, p. 707). Researchers also study why alcohol and hooking up are linked. One finding is called the alcohol myopia theory, which suggests that intoxication caused by alcohol creates cognitive impairment that can lead to a greater likelihood of risky sexual behavior (Garcia et al, 2019, p. 2).

As a new concept, there is a need for an increase in research to better understand the prevalence and effects of hookup culture. While considered culturally normative, hookups may also be associated with negative outcomes. A study by Garcia et al (2019) states the following:

While hooking up overall may not be necessarily risky in and of itself, it is of particular importance to study the effects of alcohol use with hooking up given their high prevalence rates and links to negative psychological consequences...physical health consequences (i.e., STI and pregnancy risk), associations with other risky sexual behaviors (e.g., multiple partners, inconsistent condom usage), and sexual victimization. (p. 3).

The purpose of this study was to find whether hookups are a commonly occurring experience for Ball State University undergraduate students and to explore students' perceptions of the occurrences and effects of hookups. Research questions were designed to ask students about their personal experiences with hookups, if drugs or alcohol were used prior to hookups, how they felt about their decisions, and how they perceived the culture around them. The full list of study questions can be found in Appendix A. My hypothesis was that the number of participants with hookup experiences and the perception of the normalcy of hookups would be high, and the perception of potential effects of hookup experiences would be low.

Method

Participants.

Ninety-four undergraduate students at Ball State University completed this survey. Eleven of these participants only provided demographic data, so their responses were excluded from the overall data totals. Participants were required to be at least eighteen years old to take the

survey. The mean for age was 21 and the standard deviation was 4.3. Of those who answered the question on gender, 16 participants identified as a man, 70 participants identified as a woman, and 2 identified as non-binary. The majority (87.5%) of participants identified themselves as white while 4.6% were Hispanic or Latinx, 2.3% were Black or African American, 2.3% were Asian, 1.1% were Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 2.2% were multiple races. In regards to sexuality, 71% of participants identified as exclusively heterosexual, 10% were predominantly heterosexual, 5.5% were equally heterosexual and homosexual, 4.5% were predominantly homosexual, 5.5% were exclusively homosexual, and 3.5% had no socio-sexual contacts or reactions.

Measures.

Participants were asked to complete a survey consisting of one short answer question, ten multiple choice questions, and one question on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). The first four questions collected demographic questions regarding age, gender, sexual orientation, and race. Five questions asked participants about their hookup experiences, including if alcohol, drugs, or pregnancy/STI protection were involved. Two questions asked participants how they felt about their decisions and how they anticipated feeling in five years. One question asked whether students agreed or disagreed with statements related to the normalcy of hookups (see Appendix A). Analysis was conducted through the default report generator on Qualtrics with the addition of gender and age filters for purposes of comparison.

Procedure.

This project was distributed through a combination of mass email, social media sites, and the Department of Early Childhood, Youth, and Family Studies Canvas page. Participants took

this survey online through Qualtrics with no time limit and the option to skip questions or discontinue at any time. All data was recorded anonymously. The average duration of the survey was 3.5 minutes.

Results

Experiences Results.

Question 1: “Select the option which most closely aligns with your experiences.” Four options included having hookup experiences with variants of sexual intercourse, oral sex but not intercourse, sexual touching but no oral sex or intercourse, and only kissing. The other options included not having hookup experiences with variants of interest in having one or no interest in having one. Survey results show that 58% of participants have had hookup experiences that included sexual intercourse. A combined 17% of participants had hookup experiences that included contact ranging from kissing to digital or oral intercourse. A single respondent had not had a hookup experience but was interested in having one, and 25% of participants had not had a hookup experience and were not interested in having one (see Fig. 1).

Question 2: “If you have hookup experiences, approximately how many people have you hooked up with?” Of the recipients who reported engaging in a hookup ($n = 63$), 41% of respondents had hooked up with 1-3 people, 31% had hooked up with 4-6 people, 13% had

hooked up with 7-9 people, and 15% had hooked up with more than 10 people. Out of the total number of respondents, 22 reported never having hooked up with someone.

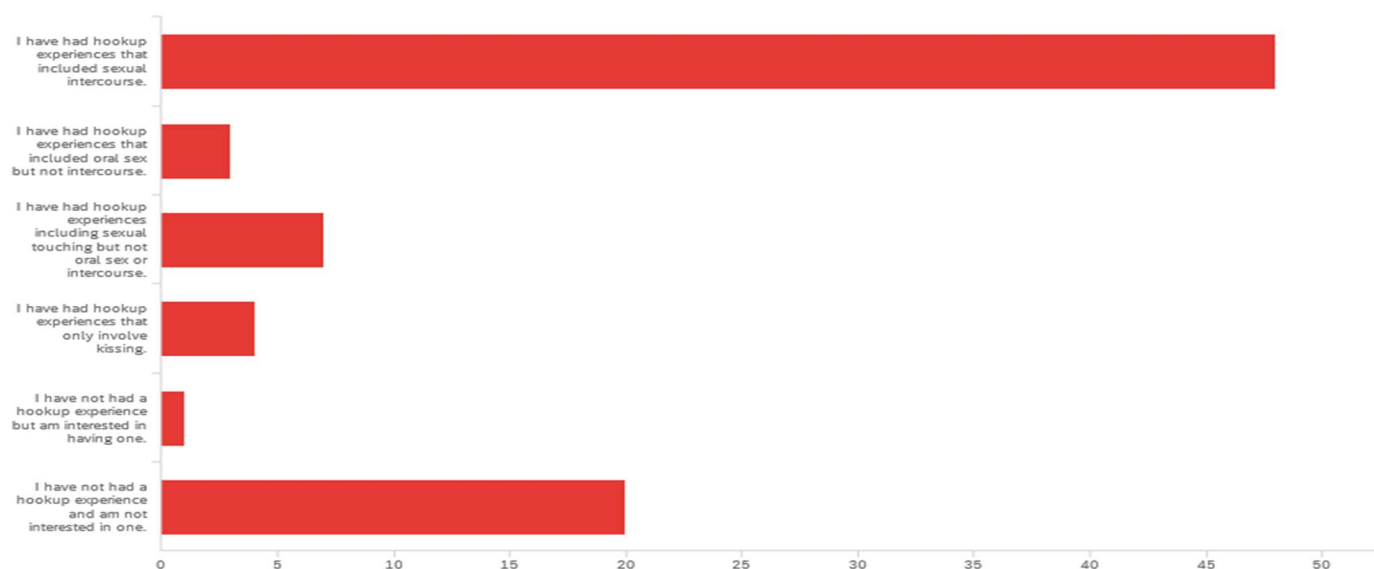


Fig. 1. Bar graph illustrating participants' reported hookup experiences.

Question 3: "What role did alcohol play in your hookup experiences?" The majority of respondents with hookup experiences reported sometimes using alcohol before hooking up with someone, with 63% reporting this experience. Students were more likely to have never consumed alcohol before a hookup than they were to have always consumed alcohol, and the percentages were 25 and 12 respectively.

Question 4: "What role did drugs play in your hookup experiences?" Drug use was dissimilar to alcohol use, and 69% of those with hookup experiences reported never using drugs before hooking up. Out of the other respondents, 29% said they sometimes used drugs and 2% always used drugs (see Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).

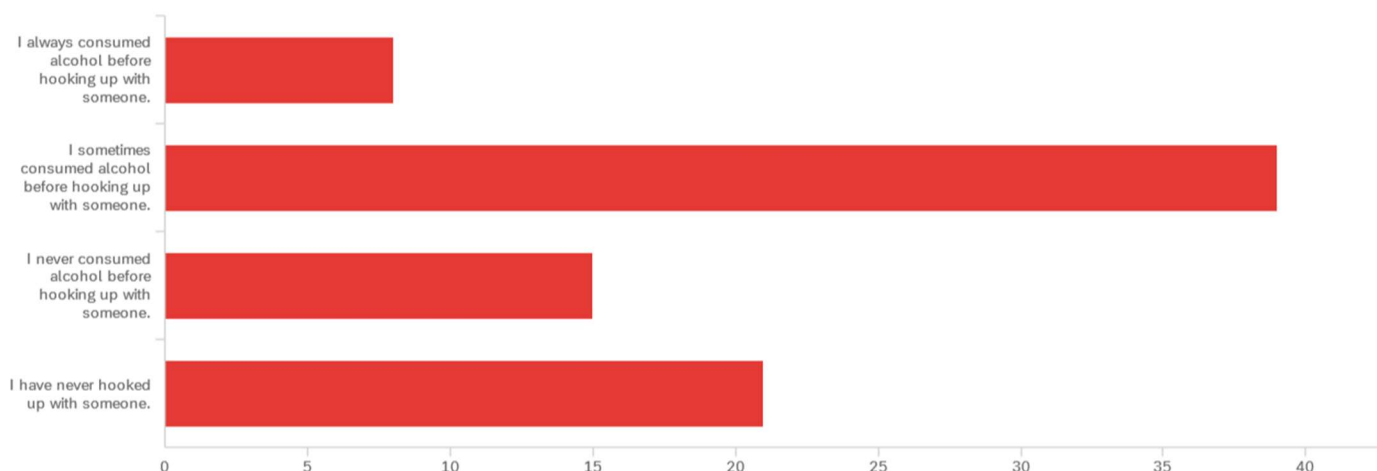


Fig. 2. Bar graph illustrating participants' reports of alcohol consumption before hookups.

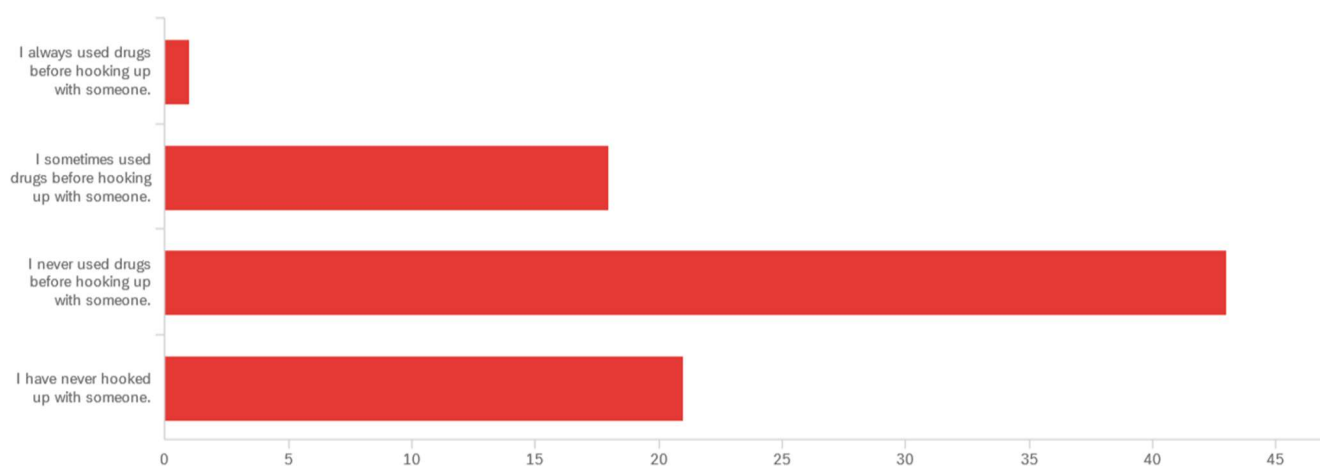


Fig. 3. Bar graph illustrating participants' reports of drug use before hookups.

Question 5: "Did you use a form of protection to prevent pregnancy or STI transmission in your hookup experiences?" Some form of pregnancy or STI protection was used by the majority of respondents with hookup experiences, and 73% reported using either a condom, a regular form of birth control such as the pill, or a combination of both.

Reflection Results.

Question 6: “Which best describes how you currently feel about your choices regarding hookups?” The majority of participants with hookup experience reported being okay with the decisions they have made, but there was variation in whether or not they would repeat their decisions. The highest percentage was 39% of respondents indicating they were okay with their decisions and would repeat some of them. In the two “okay” categories with absolutes, 24% said they were okay and would repeat all decisions while 19% were okay but would not repeat them. At the end of the question’s spectrum were the answers with the lowest percentages: 10% said they regret the decisions they made and 8% said they were happy with the decisions they made. In contrast, 86% of participants who reported no hookup experiences said that they are happy with the decisions they have made (see Fig. 4 and Fig. 5).

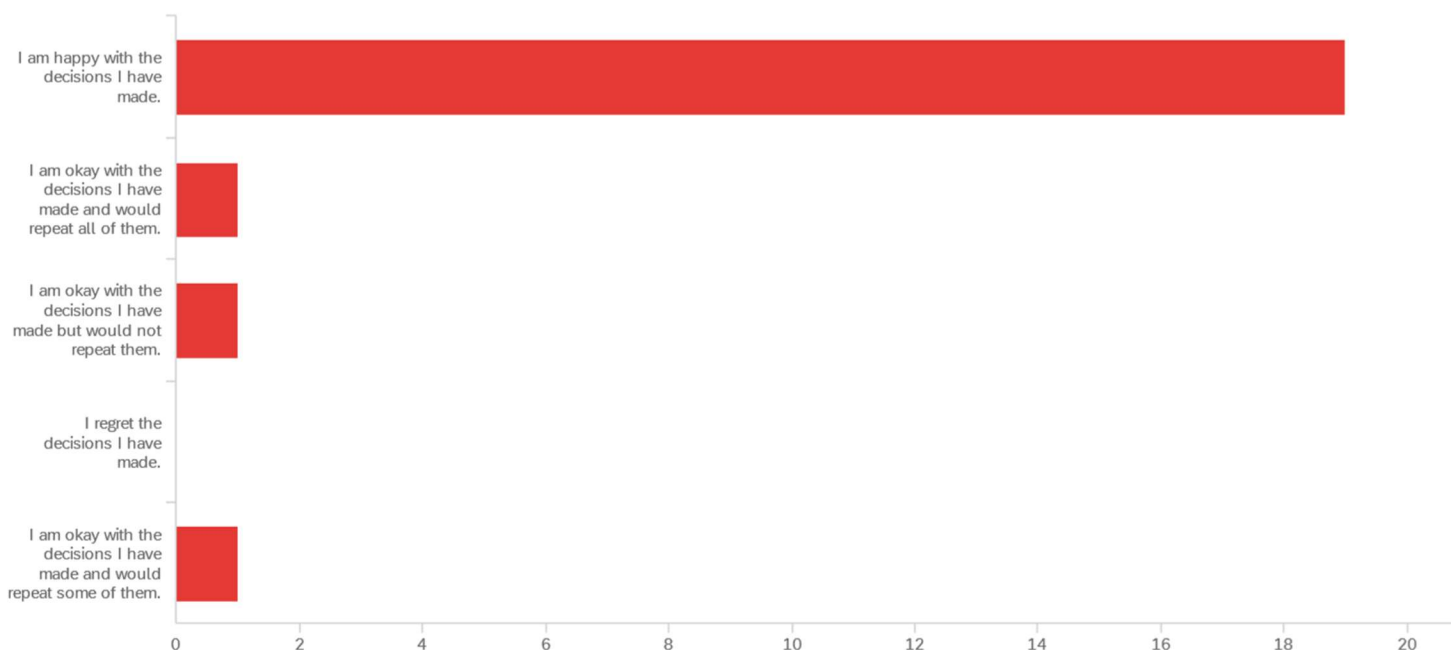


Fig. 4. Bar graph illustrating feelings of those with hookup experiences.

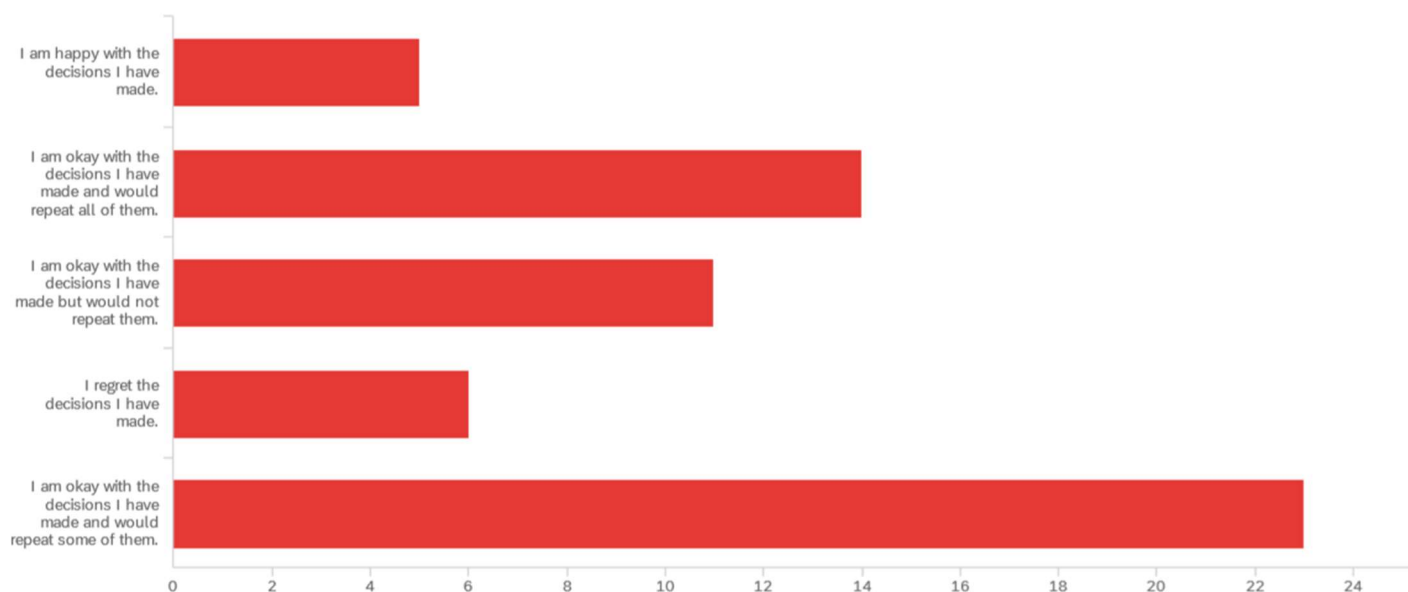


Fig. 5. Bar graph illustrating feelings of those without hookup experiences.

Question 7: “Which best describes how you think you will feel about your choices regarding hookups in 5 years?” The majority of participants with hookup experiences either would not repeat them or expected to regret them, at percentages of 47 and 8 respectively. Only 15% reported expecting to be happy with their decisions. In contrast, 90% of those reporting no hookups expected to be happy with their decisions.

Perceptions Results.

Question 8: “Rank the following statements 1-5 Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree”

The majority of participants agreed that hooking up is a normal college experience and that most college students hook up. In both questions, participants were more likely to respond as neutral than to disagree (see Fig. 6 and Fig. 7).

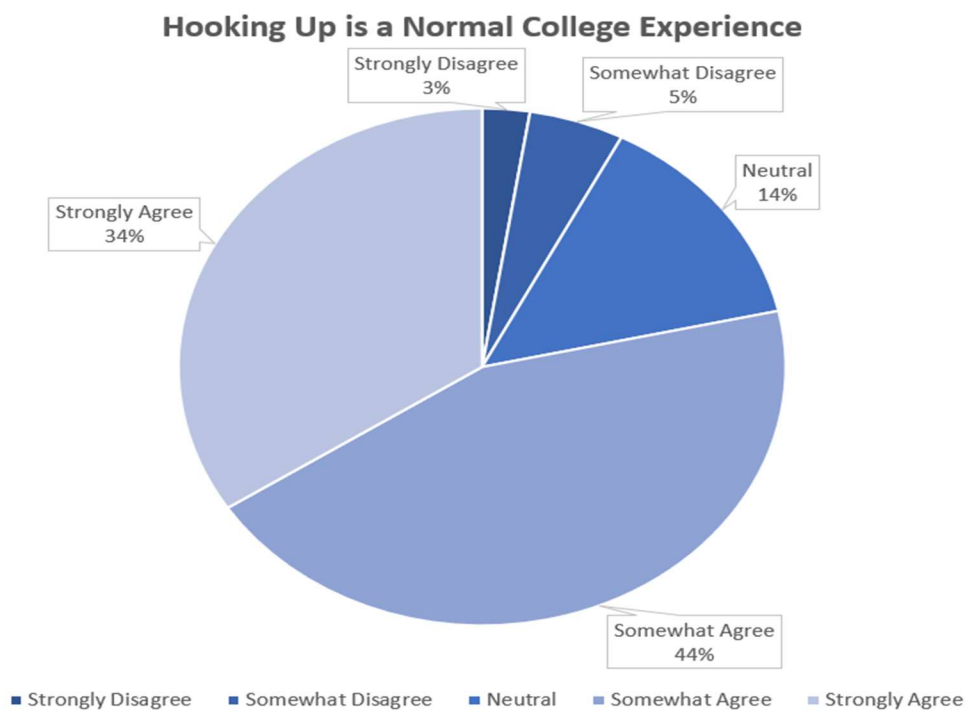


Fig. 6. Pie chart illustrating student perceptions on the normality of hookups.

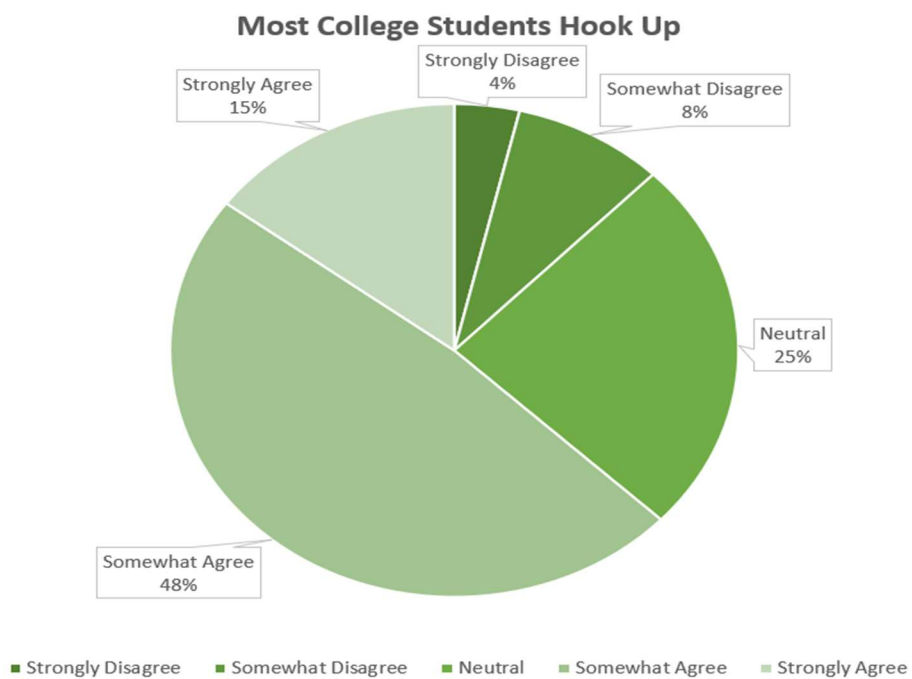


Fig. 7. Pie chart illustrating student perceptions on the prevalence of hookups.

When given the statement “It is okay to hook up with someone who has consumed alcohol,” 63% of respondents said they disagreed, 18% were neutral, and 19% agreed. The majority of participants strongly disagreed that hooking up affects a person’s ability to have a long-term relationship, and nearly the same number strongly disagreed, were neutral, or strongly agreed (see Fig. 8). When asked if they thought hookups caused people to view themselves negatively, respondents favored the three middle options, and the most common response was neutral (see Fig. 9).

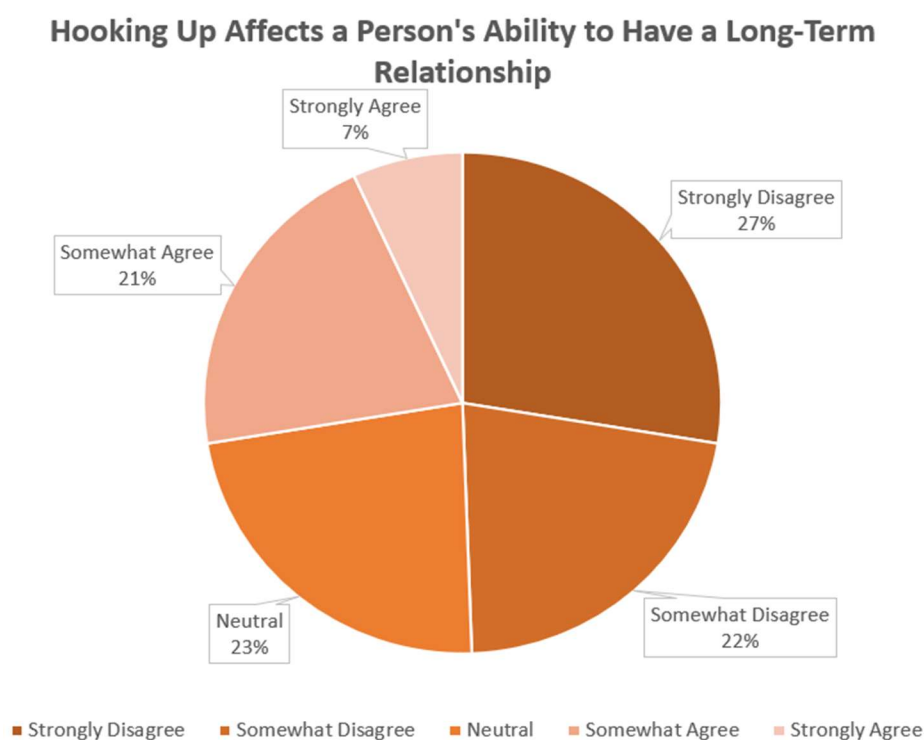


Fig. 8. Pie chart illustrating student perceptions of the effects of hookups on relationships.

Hooking Up Negatively Affects the Way People View Themselves

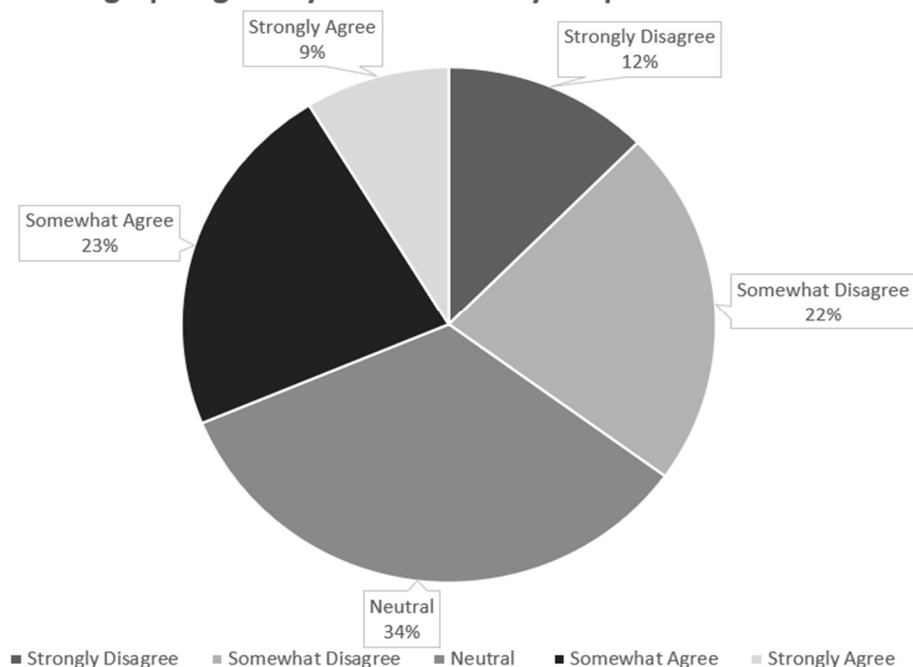


Fig. 9. Pie chart illustrating student perceptions on the effects of hookups on self-view.

Gendered Results.

Responses were filtered so only men's responses could be viewed, only women's responses could be viewed, and only the responses of non-binary persons could be viewed. Each report was saved and percentages were compared to interpret gendered results. Only slight variations were seen in the gendered reports of hookup experiences, use of alcohol and drugs, and use of protection. Differences were seen in participants' answers to Question 6: "Which best describes how you currently feel about your choices regarding hookups?" A greater percentage of women with hookup experiences reported that they would not repeat their decisions or that they regret their decisions. The percentages for these options were 22% and 13%, respectively. In comparison, 17% of men would not repeat their decisions and 0% regret them. Greater similarities were seen in response to Question 7: "Which best describes how you think you will feel about your choices regarding hookups in 5 years?" The option "I will be okay with my decisions but would not repeat them" was selected by 46% of women with hookup experience

and 50% of men with hookup experience. Responses of participants who identified as non-binary were more similar to the responses of women, with all respondents selecting that they were either okay with their decisions but would not repeat them or that they regret their decisions.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to better understand the prevalence of hookups among Ball State University students as well as students' perceptions of its popularity and individual effects. There is an interesting discrepancy between the reported use of alcohol during hookups and the reported perceptions of it not being okay to hook up with someone who has consumed alcohol. Seventy-five percent of participants marked at least sometimes drinking alcohol when they hook up. This finding is consistent with other studies which report that the number of college students who drink before hooking up are between two-thirds and three-fourths (Garcia et al, 2019, p. 6). A possibility for the difference between perception and reality may be the vague term of "drinking" in the phrasing of the question. Some people may not consider an activity "drinking" until the amount of alcohol consumed has reached the level that would be considered binge drinking. Participants may have also seen hooking up with someone who has been drinking as acceptable in some situations but unacceptable in others, which might have made it difficult to answer in absolutes. Research also shows that drinking is a common reason that college students provide for hooking up, and women consume three to five drinks before hooking up while men drink an average of seven (Garcia et al, 2019, p. 6).

Another interesting set of results was the tendency toward neutral when answering the statements concerning effect on relationship and self-view. There was no discernable trend when the total data was filtered to consider age, gender, or number of hookup experiences. This supports my hypothesis that the perception of individual effects caused by hookups would be

low. A study by James-Kangal et al (2018) found a positive association between hooking up and fewer committed relationships, however, they also found that their participants “had high expectations for future involvement in committed relationships and marriage, regardless of their level of engagement in hooking up” (p. 717). This supports the responses of the nearly 50% of participants who do not think hooking up affects future relationships. Differences in perception of the impact of hookups on the self were also greater than anticipated, and the number of participants who agreed, were neutral, and disagreed were all nearly equal. Previous research has shown hookups do not lead to later experiences of depression or lower self-esteem, and positive reactions to hookups are more common than negative reactions which can contribute to higher life satisfaction (Vrangelova, 2015, p. 493-494).

The third set of interesting results were the gendered differences in how participants felt about their hookup experiences. With the two categories combined, women were more likely to regret their experiences or not want to repeat them, and this was true both when asked how participants currently felt and how they would feel 5 years in the future. Previous research has shown that college women are more likely to regret having hooked up with someone, and hookups have shown to be a “predictive of sexual regret among college women” (Eshbaugh and Gute, 2008, p. 86). The data from this study has shown to be consistent with previous research.

Conclusion

Overall, this research shows that students’ perceptions of the normalization of hookup culture reflect the self-reported sexual behaviors of participants at Ball State University. A total of 78% of respondents said that hooking up is normal college behavior, and 63% agreed that most college students hook up. These perceptions are validated by the reports that approximately 75% of participants in this study have engaged in at least one hookup while in college. These

results support my hypothesis that hookup experiences and student perceptions of these experiences are high in number. The results of this study suggest that hookups are present and popular among the student population of Ball State University, and few overall report negative attitudes or perceptions.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

- Please type your age into the box below.

For the following questions, please select the answer with which you most closely identify

- Gender
 - Man
 - Woman
 - Non-binary
 - Other (please specify)
- Sexual orientation according to The Kinsey Scale
 - Exclusively heterosexual
 - Predominantly heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual
 - Predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual
 - Equally heterosexual and homosexual
 - Predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual
 - Predominantly homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual
 - Exclusively homosexual
 - No socio-sexual contacts or reactions
- Race
 - White
 - Hispanic or Latinx
 - Black or African-American
 - Native American or American Indian
 - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
 - Asian
 - Multiple races
 - Other (please specify)

Q1: Select the option which most closely aligns with your experiences

- I have had hookup experiences that included sexual intercourse.
- I have had hookup experiences that included oral sex but not intercourse.
- I have had hookup experiences including sexual touching but not oral sex or intercourse.
- I have had hookup experiences that only involve kissing.
- I have not had a hookup experience but am interested in having one.
- I have not had a hookup experience and am not interested in one.

Q2: If you have hookup experiences, approximately how many people have you hooked up with?

- 1-3
- 4-6
- 7-9
- 10+
- I have never hooked up with someone.

Q3: What role did alcohol play in your hookup experiences?

- I always consumed alcohol before hooking up with someone.
- I sometimes consumed alcohol before hooking up with someone.
- I never consumed alcohol before hooking up with someone.
- I have never hooked up with someone.

Q4: What role did drugs play in your hookup experiences?

- I always did drugs before hooking up with someone.
- I sometimes did drugs before hooking up with someone.
- I never did drugs before hooking up with someone.
- I have never hooked up with someone.

Q5: Did you use a form of protection to prevent pregnancy or STI transmission in your hookup experiences?

- Yes, my partner and I used a condom.
- Yes, I or my partner uses a regular form of birth control (pill, shot, IUD, etc.)
- Yes, my partner and I used both a condom and regular form of birth control.
- We did not use any form of protection.
- I do not know if we used any form of protection.
- I have never hooked up with someone.

Q6: Which best describes how you currently feel about your choices regarding hookups?

- I am happy with the decisions I have made.
- I am okay with the decisions I have made and would repeat them.
- I am okay with the decisions I have made but would not repeat them.
- I regret the decisions I have made.

Q7: Which best describes how you think you will feel about your choices regarding hookups in 5 years?

- I will be happy with the decisions I have made.
- I will be okay with the decisions I have made and would repeat them.
- I will be with the decisions I have made but would not repeat them.
- I will regret the decisions I have made.

Q8: Rank the following statements 1-5 Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree

- Hooking up is a normal college experience.
- Most college students hook up.
- It is okay to hook up with someone after they have consumed alcohol.
- It is okay to hook up with someone after they have done any type of illicit drug.
- Hooking up affects a person's ability to have a long-term relationship.
- Hooking up negatively impacts the way participants view themselves.



Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
2000 University Avenue
Muncie, IN 47306-0155
Phone: 765-285-5052
Email: orihelp@bsu.edu

DATE: April 9, 2020
TO: Megan Evans
FROM: Ball State University IRB
RE: IRB protocol # 1557721-1
TITLE: College Hookup Culture: Student Perceptions and the Implications for Individual Well-Being
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
DECISION: APPROVED
PROJECT STATUS: EXEMPT
DECISION DATE: April 9, 2020
REVIEW TYPE: Exempt Review

The designated reviewer for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your protocol and determined the procedures you have proposed are appropriate for exemption under the federal regulations. As such, there will be no further review of your protocol, and you are cleared to proceed with the procedures outlined in your protocol. As an exempt study, there is no requirement for continuing review. Your protocol will remain on file with the IRB as a matter of record. All research under this protocol must be conducted in accordance with the approved submission and in accordance with the principles of the Belmont Report.

Exempt Categories:

	Category 1: Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes most research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.
x	Category 2: Research that only includes interactions involving educational test (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through

	identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 46.111(a)(7).
	Category 3: Research involving benign behavioral interventions in conjunction with the collection of information from an adult subject through verbal or written responses (including data entry) or audiovisual recording if the subject prospectively agrees to the intervention and information collection and at least one of the following criteria is met: (A) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of human subjects cannot be readily ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (B) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (C) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can be readily ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 46.111(a)(7).
	Category 4: Secondary research for which consent is not required.
	Category 5: Research and demonstration projects that are conducted or supported by a Federal department or agency, or otherwise subject to the approval of department or agency heads, and that are designed to study, evaluate, improve, or otherwise examine public benefit or service programs, including procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs, possible changes in or alternatives to those programs or procedures, or possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or services under those programs.
	Category 6: Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives are consumed or (ii) if a food is consumed that contains a food ingredient at or below the level found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.
	Category 7: Storage or maintenance for secondary research for which broad consent is required: Storage or maintenance of identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens for potential secondary research use if an IRB conducts a limited IRB review and makes the determinations required by 46.111(a)(8).
	Category 8: Secondary research for which broad consent is required: Research involving the use of identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens for secondary research use, if the following criteria are met: (1) Broad consent for the storage, maintenance, and secondary research use of the identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens was obtained in accordance with §46.116(a)(1) through (4), (a)(6), and (d); (2) Documentation of informed consent or waiver of documentation of consent was obtained in accordance with §46.117; and (3) An IRB conducts a limited IRB review and makes the determination required by §46.111(a)(7) and makes the determination that the research to be conducted is within the scope of the broad consent referenced in paragraph (d)(8)(i) of this section; and (iv) The investigator does not include returning individual research results to participants as part of the study plan. Note: This provision does not prevent an investigator from abiding by any legal requirements to return individual research results.

Ball State Specific Exempt Categories

	Category 9: Research involving publicly observable online behavior. Any online behavior that requires a person's permission to access is considered private and does not fall under this category. Information that cannot be accessed by the general population would also be considered private.
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<p>Category 10: Research involving BSU students who are under 18 but have legal authority over their FERPA protected information. Only studies that fall into another exempt category except for sampling from BSU students who are under 18 can be considered exempt in this category.</p>

Editorial Notes:

1. Approved.

While your project does not require continuing review, it is the responsibility of the P.I. (and, if applicable, faculty supervisor) to inform the IRB if the procedures presented in this protocol are to be modified or if problems related to human research participants arise in connection with this project. **Any procedural modifications must be evaluated by the IRB before being implemented, as some modifications may change the review status of this project.** Please contact Sena Lim at (765)285-5034 or slim2@bsu.edu if you are unsure whether your proposed modification requires review or have any questions. Proposed modifications should be addressed in writing and submitted electronically to the IRBNet as a "Modification/Amendment" for review. Please reference your IRB protocol number 1557721-1 in any communication to the IRB regarding this project.

In the case of an adverse event and/or unanticipated problem, you will need to submit written documentation of the event to IRBNet under this protocol number and you will need to directly notify the Office of Research Integrity (<http://www.bsu.edu/irb>) **within 5 business days**. If you have questions, please contact Sena Lim at (765)285-5034 or slim2@bsu.edu.

Reminder: Even though your study is exempt from the relevant federal regulations of the Common Rule (45 CFR 46, subpart A), Ball State has elected to hold you accountable to these regulations to encourage best research practices. You and your research team are not exempt from ethical research practices and should therefore employ all protections for your participants and their data which are appropriate to your project.